Program Report: Experiences in El Salvador with Global Youth Connect

The time I spent in El Salvador with Global Youth Connect was one of the most rewarding, fascinating and challenging experiences of my life. As a part of my LACIS major I have been studying the politics and social history of Latin American, and much of my study has focused on human rights. Throughout the program I was continually amazed by the way it seemed to embody every facet of my education. With delegations in post-conflict zones all over the world, Global Youth Connect is an organization dedicated to promoting human rights, creating solidarity among activists, and educating youth about their role in creating a more peaceful society.

GYC did an excellent job of ensuring that the participants from the United States were able to collaborate with Salvadorans on a level more intimate than that of a tourist. During the two weeks we were there we collaborated with Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad based out of San Salvador. Three days at the beginning of our trip were devoted to a human rights workshop at CIS. The workshop participants consisted of the U.S. participants from GYC and Salvadoran youth and CIS employees. During the workshop we did various activities to discuss and analyze what human rights are, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and human rights practices in both El Salvador and the United States.

In addition to the human rights workshop we also traveled to two smaller villages outside of San Salvador. The first village was Cinquera, where we learned of the town’s history with respect to the Civil War. The town historian detailed the trauma and anguish the village and his
own family experienced during the war. We also went on a hike through a nature preserve. The preserve protected an old guerrilla encampment, and on the hike we were able to see and learn how the guerrillas lived in the mountains during the war. This experience was enhanced by the fact that the guide we had that worked at the preserve was a former guerrilla fighter himself. The second village was San Rafael Cedros. Here we conducted workshops for high school-age youth covering environmental protection and HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. These workshops were rewarding because we were able to engage the youth in what we hope will be a lasting conversation about these pertinent issues. I was a part of the HIV/AIDS workshop and I saw initially timid participants learn and converse eagerly, and then confidently teach what they had learned to the students in the environmental workshop.

These two site visits were very rewarding and eye-opening. During both visits we stayed with host families in the villages. The home stays provided us with the opportunity to truly experience life in these villages. The accommodations were very common to the villages but far from what many of us had ever experienced before. The first family I stayed with lived with five people in a one room house and was without running water. The second family I stayed with was in a similar situation, but many members of the family stayed outside the main house in rooms made of corrugated metal and plastic sheets. The use of latrines and the constant crowing of roosters definitely took some getting used to. The families we stayed with and the people we met were incredibly welcoming and accommodating. The people I met on this trip definitely made the entire experience worth it.

Throughout the trip we listened to various grassroots community organizations describe their work. Being able to talk with the leaders of the organizations was extremely interesting. We were able to ask tough questions about how the organizations were formed, what keeps them
functioning well, and how they fit into the socio-political framework of El Salvador. These people were inspiring and they were able to leave us with concrete examples of successful activism efforts.

I have never visited any other Latin American countries, but my guess is that El Salvador, and particularly GYC’s trip, offers students a deeply meaningful alternative perspective with which to view Latin America. GYC makes a point of taking participants off the beaten path to places where participants can learn about the heart and soul of the country. We stayed away from the commercial center of San Salvador where high-end retail stores and luxury car dealerships abound. We didn’t stay at the tourist-friendly Hilton hotel or eat at the Burger King. GYC was able to help us get to know El Salvador in a way that was unique yet still professional, safe, and responsible. My experience was intellectually and personally rewarding, but it was also emotionally difficult. This experience is not for people looking for a vacation or who do not possess the maturity to deal first-hand with a nation still recovering from past trauma. Despite this difficulty I came away from this trip with a very positive, hopeful view of the country, its people, and the role I can play as a human rights activist. I highly recommend GYC’s program to anyone interested in truly understanding the inner workings of El Salvador from a human rights perspective.